

“Routes of Identity”: In Conversation with Bharati Mukherjee Sharmani Patricia Gabriel

Bharati Mukherjee was in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in June 2003 as a guest of the United States Embassy to deliver a series of public lectures on a “Writers on America” project. The following interview had its beginnings as a digital video conference on 29 May 2003, with me speaking from the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur to the author in San Francisco. This “virtual” conversation was followed up with a personal meeting with Professor Mukherjee at the Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur on 3 June 2003.

Mukherjee is author of six novels – *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002) – and two collections of short fiction -- *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), for which she was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction in 1988. She has also written several pieces of social commentary, many of which share the ideological concerns of her fiction.

Over the course of her thirty-year creative and critical career, Mukherjee has energetically been engaged in redefining American national identity from the perspective of immigration, which she construes as a cultural process that keeps the meaning of America alive to continual re-invention.

Bharati Mukherjee lives in San Francisco and is currently Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley.

In a much publicized, front-page article for The New York Times Book Review in 1988, you elucidated with great passion and enthusiasm that the primary goal of your critical and creative project was to write about the making of the “new” Americans, whom you define as Americans from non-traditional immigrant countries who have never been written about before

in American literature. Do you continue to see your goal as a writer in those terms today?

Yes, very much so. Since 1965, when the late Robert Kennedy, who was Attorney General at that time, changed the immigration laws, making it easier for people from non-European countries to come into the United States, there has been a steady and visible growth in the population of non-European Americans. However, the literary traditions of the 1960s, and prior to the 1960s, did not have the vocabulary, the discourse, for talking about the particular kinds of experiences or identity crises that the non-Europeans encountered once they had made the circuitous journey to the United States, which is where their real odyssey started. And it is that particular passion, the messiness of immigration and the triumphant but, at the same time, raw messiness of becoming part of the larger social fabric of the United States that I'm interested in fictionalising and dramatizing. I think right now the big story in the United States is multiculturalism rather than the racial black-white discourse that gave rise to standard, although sometimes exciting, fiction prior to the mid-1960s.

Much of the force of your immigrant narratives comes from your portrayal of characters who are determined to construct new identities and a new sense of belonging for themselves from "the hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between two worlds," as you describe it in your essay "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman." That sense of danger and adventure is evident even in your recent works. Hasn't your romance with the United States been dimmed by forty years of living and writing in America?

I am a romantic, and my passion just gets more intense. But mine is a clear-eyed love of immigration and reformation of personality that the United States has offered me. And, so, in the last forty years, just as the society of the United States has become more nuanced in political terms, especially in its attitude to its non-European naturalized citizens, I too have become more nuanced in the ways in which I know what I want and how I want to fit in American society.

Do you see the migrant perspective as still being capable of telling fresh, new stories about cultural change and transformation?

Yes, absolutely. I believe that it is the fact of being “in between,” of having a fresh angle on the narrative of remaking the self in the new world, that keeps the immigrant writer, the naturalized American writer, at her or his most fervent, intense and sensitive.

While you have been received favourably by publishers and the reading public, you have faced a good deal of criticism, particularly from India-born critics in the United States for neglecting issues of race, education and gender in your tales of survivors, particularly in the novel, Jasmine. What is your response to such criticism?

I have given a long response to such criticism in an on-line journal of post-colonial literature called *Jouvert* that comes out of Columbia University where some postcolonial scholars who were born in Asia congregate. I have said this before, the writer can only write about the individual self. Only fifteenth-rate literature will come out of writers who want, first, to have a political agenda and then write to fulfill that agenda. My romance is with the ways in which the individual even when faced with adversity responds to that adversity. I think fiction writers, serious literary fiction writers, and Marxist postcolonial critics are always going to be at loggerheads. What the scholars want is theory, they want to have a particular theory to impose on fiction and they look to the socio-economic status of the writer rather than the text itself. I'm sure that many of these critics whom you refer to have actually not read my books. But they have read each other on Mukherjee. And also, I take issue with scholars who need for someone who looks like me—I'm talking about skin colour and particular accent in English—to write about “postcolonial” issues. Postcolonial critics like Spivak and her disciples would want me to participate in a kind of gender writing where the women characters should be seen as being oppressed. In the short story, “Jasmine,” the protagonist knows exactly what she wants—she has grown up in the multicultural society of the New World—she knows what she is willing to barter for what kind of private pleasure and so the ending of the story where she is seen making love to her white employer on the rug in front of the fireplace was seen initially by American women critics as, “Look, Mukherjee is showing Third World women being exploited

by white male Americans,” whereas I am saying that Jasmine is a much stronger and smarter character. She sets out to get what she wants. She may be misguided, but she knows what she wants. Postcolonial scholars would like me to dramatize all white people as villains and oppressors and all non-white characters as the oppressed and victimized. I refuse to do that because it is not the way my characters respond to circumstances in life, it is not the way I see people around me respond necessarily to circumstances.

What you are saying then is, as a writer of immigrant literature, your goal is to construct a new narrative of Americanness, in contrast to the postcolonial writer who is more interested in creating a new mythology of postcolonial nationhood?

Yes, definitely. I’m saying that I am an American writer. If I were to define myself as a “postcolonial” writer, I would still have to be writing about Indo-British relationships.

While you make clear your reasons for not wanting to be called a “postcolonial” writer, as a formerly colonized subject yourself do you not view the term or concept of “postcolonial” serving any usefulness?

Only to the extent that I realize I would have been a very different kind of writer if destiny had deposited me in Britain rather than in the United States. In that case, if I had lived my entire adult life in Great Britain, I would have been concerned not only with postcolonial issues and the need for race relations to be worked out in terms of brown and white in Britain, I would also be writing a very different kind of English. The liberation for me personally was that through accidents of love—I fell in love with a fellow student of the [Iowa] Writers’ Workshop when I was 23 years old and got married to him in a five-minute lunchtime wedding—I realized that my life had changed and that I was going to have to lead my entire life in the United States, the New World. Slowly, gradually, I realized that there had been, whether I had wanted it or not, a great deal of erosion in the language structure, the syntax and the choice of point of view that as a novelist I felt comfortable with. When I first arrived in the United States, I was very much a postcolonial writer

who thought of the omniscient point of view as being the most comfortable. I was playing in my first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, with parodying Forster and Jane Austen and all the great British novelists who had been held up to me in my school and college days as the ones to imitate. I would have, if I had considered myself a postcolonial writer, been mimicking and bettering those British narrative models. But the accident of suddenly being deposited in the New World meant there are no rules and so I had to find not only ways of identifying myself as a newcomer in the New World, but also find new forms of novel writing, of short story writing, in order to articulate all these new feelings. So the language and the form became very, very different. I see myself in the tradition of other immigrant groups, of the post-1965 non-Europeans who have had additional factors or stresses to deal with or address in their finding a spot in the American social fabric. But my personal interest is in totally deleting the academic postcolonial discourse about centre and periphery. I'm saying, "We are all, no matter where we might have come from originally, equal partners here and United States society has to change in order to accommodate this new sense of who we are."

Your work in this sense, as a writer and a social and cultural commentator, collectively presents a profile that is almost unique in America. Among writers who belong to the South Asian diaspora in the United States (I'm thinking here of the more established names such as Anita Desai and Bapsi Sidhwa as well as newer voices such as Jhumpa Lahiri), yours seems to be a more strident voice in the American literary scene. How would you compare or contrast your work with that of these other writers of South Asian ancestry who also deal with the immigrant experience in America?

There is a critical mass of writers now [in America], and many of them happen to be women writers, who either were born in India or are of Indian ancestry. The majority, the Anita Desais, the Bapsi Sidhwas, are expatriate Indian writers whose inspiration is still derived from experiences that happened in India and at a time perhaps when they were not personal witnesses to those incidents. So theirs is a virtual experience of the homeland. They are writing about nostalgia, they are producing expatriate fiction, which is perfectly fine, but that's not American fiction.

They are not constructing themselves, they are not seeing themselves as American writers. I think Jhumpa Lahiri and I are among the very few who are writing not about the India we left behind but the here and now, the daily life that we encounter and that many hundreds and thousands of other South Asians or other immigrant groups are facing in the United States right now. We are writing immigrant fiction, whereas writers like Anita Desai and Bapsi Sidhwa, marvellous though their writing is, are writing nostalgic expatriate fiction.

Professor Mukherjee, you were born into a prominent Bengali family of wealth and standing—

That was all a long time ago [laughter] – and that is why I get attacked so much by postcolonial critics.... (laughter)

-- and protected by the strict caste system of India. In a recent essay called "On Being an American Writer," you write that Indian immigrant writers like you arrived in America "after the cultural and political wars of the 1960's and never experienced the civil rights battles or the Vietnamese resistance." What is interesting, however, is that for a person who had led a very sheltered existence, you went on to vigorously participate in social and political causes in America. What particular moment or incident was responsible for bringing about your active involvement in social issues?

There were many different moments rather than a single moment. When I arrived in the fall of 1961 as a student of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, there were very few Indian women in America — many of the professional women from South Asia came as a result of a change in immigration laws in 1965 and the 1970's. So I was present as the Americans my age got involved in women's movements — Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* was out in 1962 and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in 1963. If I had married, let us say, the perfect Bengali bridegroom, the kind that my father would have picked for me, I think probably I would have been less politicized and writing very different kinds of fiction. But because I married an American—I got married and had my first child when I was 23—I became absorbed in my husband Clark's kinds of interests. I knew more about American sports because he was a sports

fan, I knew about Trivial Pursuit simply because I was a young, dutiful wife. I took over, I shared all those interests in ways that American women my age may not have. And so I was also learning to change my sympathies, learning to sensitize myself to minority problems while at the same time experiencing social demotion. I learned to gain a theoretical as well as emotional feel for the underclass. I was no longer Dr. Mukherjee's daughter living in a walled, princess-like setting. No one knew or cared about what my family was like. And then, in Canada, around 1973, 1974, when the policy papers about Canada were out, racism was targetted primarily at South Asian immigrants, the professionals who had kids in private schools, more than the poor labourers from other groups. That Canadian experience of institutional and physical violence—I was sent to sit at the back of the Greyhound bus—made me a far more political citizen and a far more politicized writer, politicized in the sense that I could not write about a love story, about a man and a woman as a white American writer might about personal relationships. My stories are always set in the context of social and racial conflicts. But I also, because I came from a privileged background in my formative years, whether I wanted it or not, because I was a privileged member of the establishment in Calcutta, I had the confidence to say, "I will not put up with this kind of injustice." But mine was a lone voice in the late 1970's, in those years of incredibly violent race relations. My experience of virulent and unabashed racism, without the support or relief of the Constitution or constitutive agencies of redress, in Canada is what made me a strong, outspoken person. My prologue to the collection of stories in *Darkness* is one of the most important essays I have written about racism in Canada. I wrote it because the series editor wanted a prologue. But it gave me the chance to suddenly articulate to myself the difference I felt between writing in Canada and writing in the United States about the "coloured" immigrants, about the hundreds and thousands of people like me.

Professor Mukherjee, the texts, Jasmine and The Middleman and Other Stories, are on the primary reading list of the American Literature course offered by the English Department of the University of Malaya, where I teach.

While my students sympathized with the difficulties of displacement that confronted your women characters, the female students especially felt rather uncomfortable with the choices made by some of your protagonists—such as Nafisa in “The Lady from Lucknow” [from the Darkness collection], Maya in “The Tenant” [from The Middleman and Other Stories], and especially Jasmine of the short story and novel—whose growing empowerment in America was articulated in primarily sexual terms. Does the sexual freedom of your characters function as an index of their Americanization?

I do not know if I would call it [the sexual empowerment of my characters] an index of their Americanization. To me and for the characters you have just mentioned, the breaking out of that world of taboos is not equivalent to or the exact equal of Americanization. But it is interesting saying, “I am no longer that old given self, the one that was governed by social dictates. But I am not running out of control. I am someone willing to change myself and take risks, though some of those risks may be silly or excessive and the fallout of those adventures can be harmful.” So for me and my authorial vision, having had the guts to take that step outside the safe parameters of the old self is in itself a kind of progress. It is positive, it is saying that change is possible, it is saying, “I’m willing to look for a new identity.” The risk-taking of some of these characters and their self-discovery can take many forms, but in the case of these women characters, because they have been so confined in terms of gender, their form of self-control takes the form of sexual liberation. But in my head, I never equated that with Americanization because I do not believe as an author, as an individual and as a citizen that there is any such thing as a fixed “Americannness.”

Does that risk-taking by your characters explain the preponderance of violence in your fiction?

Yes. There are many kinds of transformation, especially for those of us who have come out of traditional societies, out of very, very sheltered backgrounds, as I did, and then landing in an alien culture where there are no rules that you recognize, where you do not know any of the rules of the new country. Risk-taking and the consequences of that risk-

taking can be very, very violent. That uprooting from what you know to land somewhere where you have no clue as to what is expected of you, let alone what you expect of yourself, is a traumatizing experience. And so, as a writer, I have to find metaphors for talking about the psychic violence of up-rooting and re-rooting. That is why there is so much physical violence in my fiction. This physical violence can take either the form of sexual violence or of actual homes burning down, as in [the novel] *Leave It to Me*. I grew up in a Calcutta that first had to fight the colonialists, and then go through the bloody violence of Partition and the language riots. So violence has been the condition for writers like me, though now it has gotten more prevalent. I'm talking about violence as a psychic, social and physical condition.

Your work revolves around the idea of people being dispersed from their homeland and in showing how the "original" culture that the immigrant subject brings with her or him gets transformed through active interaction with American culture, which itself is transformed by that interaction. This results, as you have defined it, in the formation of a new "immigrant" American culture. While you privilege the term "immigrant" to refer to the context which makes identity and cultural change and renewal possible, how amenable are you to your works being explored in the context of "diaspora"? I refer here to the idea of diaspora as articulated by cultural theorists such as James Clifford and Stuart Hall, who view diaspora as dynamic communities that shape and reshape their own ancestral culture as well as the cultures with which they come into contact.

I try to stay away from the vocabulary of theorists as much as possible. So, if you had not put it so clearly, I probably would not have understood what is meant by diaspora! [laughter]. Anyway, I think I have always been very clear about cultural change. In fact, I was attacked by cultural theorists when the prologue to *Darkness* came out saying that we are a series of fluid identities, that culture never stops. What I say in my essay in the book called *Letters of Transit [Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss]* edited by Andre Aciman, which also has essays by Edward Said and Eva Hoffman, is that those who have self-fashioned themselves as expatriate South Asian writers, even

though they may carry American passports, are creating an India that is imaginary, an India that is totally shaped by nostalgia. It is not the India that Indians of 2003 live in. “Diaspora” means that you have reshaped yourself to your private purposes, to suit what you want to do with your original culture. Now I’m not sure if that is consonant with what people like Hall and the others are saying but that is what I am saying. Diaspora is only one part of my concern and my characters’ concern. Diaspora is the end of that zigzag route – when you think the journey is over it is only just beginning.

The term “assimilation” generally carries negative connotations in many national contexts. Certainly, here in Malaysia, the dominant cultures’ tacit expectation that immigrant communities shed every vestige of their past and cultural history if they are to be accommodated has met with considerable resistance from minority communities. Do you see any similarities with this position and how you treat or speak of assimilation in your writings?

A cherished strategy of mine, a very well thought-out strategy of mine, especially when I’m writing a first-person novel as in *Jasmine* is to have other minor characters who are also experiencing immigration or sexual rebellion but with very different responses. So while Jasmine breaks away from the ghetto and lights out for other kinds of experiences, I have also included other groups like the Kannibal Indians who never get the chance—the establishment does not give them a chance—or the Caribbean day-care workers who have to leave their children behind in the islands in order to be underpaid housekeepers so that white American women can become professional directors and lawyers. And so these characters are going to have a very different response to America. And I hope I have made it clear that Jasmine, while she is a very lovable character, has wants, however reckless, has hopes and that there are others who are critiquing her particular desire and persistence, her hope. So it is not that I am for assimilation against retention, but I’m saying that natural erosion will take place unless you artificially—I’m putting this in the American context—unless you artificially over many generations hang on to an identity that you claim is stable rather than mutable. The authorial vision must always be wiser and detached enough to make

the protagonist a part of a much larger scene. It seems to be the need of cultural theorists like Spivak to attack me as an assimilationist because I have said that I am an American writer. My fight is with even Black Americans who feel they need to exoticize in order to be seen as multicultural. For me saying that you are not part of the centre is not being multicultural. Multicultural is not about saying "I am no longer Indian" but about each of us, even within the South Asian group, finding in ourselves signs of mongrelization, syncretism, synthesis.

In Malaysia, a diasporic nation like many other formerly colonized countries, those of us who position ourselves as "Malaysian" reject the state's identification of us as "immigrants." For to be immigrant, in state ideology, is to belong "elsewhere," to not fully belong "here." However, you privilege the term "immigrant" in your cultural and political aesthetic as an American writer. How do you explain the difference between these positions?

The word, the concept "immigrant" is true of me because I came as an immigrant to the States. I am not a first-generation American. I am an immigrant who is a naturalized United States citizen. In those nation states where the concept of citizenship is worked out in terms of either religious, linguistic or ethnic criteria, it becomes harder for the individual who does not belong in those officially designated "national" categories to say, "I am one of you, treat me as a first-class citizen." I don't know much about Malaysia to make parallel contrasts but in a society like the United States, where the mythology, never mind how it converts into practice, where the mythology says, "We are all like minded. You are American if you subscribe to the specific values articulated in the American Bill of Rights and the Constitution," it becomes much easier for those first-generation, second-generation minority groups to claim membership, full membership, in that society because the rhetoric gives us the chance.

Do you write with a particular readership in mind?

I think my primary readership is going to be American because I have never written a book about any other country, except for my first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*. But that does not mean that I write with an

American readership in mind. I'm writing for people like me who have gone through that experience of dislocation, and I'm writing for people like you as well who can take something out of the stories of individuals whose particulars may be very different but whose conflicts may have some resemblance to the facts of their own lives.

In The Middleman and Other Stories and the works that follow, the scope of your fiction was broadened to encompass the narrative of the other, non-Indian, minority groups in America. However, in your latest novel, Desirable Daughters, apart from the character of the Hungarian refugee, Andy, your characters are principally from the Indian immigrant community, that of New York in particular. In this sense, the novel seems to me to carry strong echoes of the pre-Middleman phase of your writing; I'm thinking in particular of your early novel Wife. It seems to me that in your latest novel you are very concerned with showing the heterogeneities within the Indian immigrant community in America rather than showcasing the diversity of American groups.

I think that the setting and the American adventures are all dictated by the particular character and his or her circumstances. In my last novel, I wanted to write about three sisters, much like my own sisters and myself, who, when deposited in America, responded very differently to the experience of being outside rules, outside the country, outside family protection. So, because I did that and I was writing at the end of the millennium when the Indian immigrant group had gathered critical mass, it is a very different kind of America in which Tara finds herself than, say, Jasmine did, or like I did when I was writing *Darkness*. When I first arrived in America, if you saw an Indian on the street of Manhattan, you would say "Hello!" [laughter]. As a result, the kind of groups that the two United States-based sisters, Tara and Padma, deal with are very much within their own South Asian immigrant, naturalized, American community—a community that someone like Jasmine would have wished to belong to, or that was necessary for someone like Dimple [in *Wife*] to belong to. And so, you're quite right, I wanted to get across the sense that being a South Asian American is not a monolithic identity. It was even worse when they would lump all Asian writ-

ers together. Now that there is enough fiction being written about the Indian diaspora, it is important for people to realize that one character does not represent the range of identities and experiences.

One of the first things that struck me when I started reading Desirable Daughters is that the main character is called Tara, also the name of the protagonist of your first novel, The Tiger's Daughter. Is there a story behind this?

[laughter] It was only after I was quite well into the novel that I realized my first protagonist was also a Tara. So, no, it was purely unintentional.

In Desirable Daughters, the sense of languor with which you recreate personal, family and cultural history, and the lushness of detail with which you evoke East Bengal in the opening section of the book seems to jar with the speed and violence of the concluding sections of the novel. Are you contrasting Tara's ancestral past with her quest for self discovery in the American present?

Yes, because the beginning comes back to the end and the ending comes back to the beginning. This is the family memory, memoir, that Tara is constructing for herself. She who had been anxious to leave the control of her husband, Bish Chatterjee, whom she had misjudged as another patriarch, and get out of the gated community of Atherton to go find herself, to go pursue her personal happiness in the Upper Haight area of San Francisco, has to come back to realize what it is that she has cut off from herself. She has to discover and reassess her family history, she has to try to understand her national history. And it is in doing so that she understands her ex-husband Bish, understands why they are very different. Tara needs to immerse herself in that lushness to rediscover within herself all the sensory details that she had rejected, all that she had not wanted to know, as a young woman.

You portray your women characters as being adaptable due to their upbringing and cultural conditioning, and therefore more resilient and innovative in facing the pressure of constructing new identities. In this context, your male characters, the Indian husbands – carriers of patriarchal constructs into America – tend to suffer the stigma of stereotype. However, Bish

[in Desirable Daughters] seems to have broken away from this mould, for through him you show, for the first time, the kinds of pressures that Indian men also face in America. Is there any particular reason for this?

I guess I fell in love with Bish [laughter]. Bish is someone who never really yields the core part of himself. He can integrate American football—he watches Joe Montana [an American football star] on TV and gets the brainwave for CHATTEE—and other aspects of American culture into his Bengali identity, which is seen in the kind of clothes that he wears. This strategy may not work out for Tara or the other Silicon Valley wives that get together in the mall. Yes, I thought I understood Bish much better as I got into the first draft. He becomes in a way the novel's hero. He suffers. Tara doesn't realize during the course of her adventures in America that it is Bish who is the target of the assassins.

How has this book been received in India?

It made the top 10 publisher's listing in India — finally! My last couple of books did not interest Indians so much. They felt I was merely writing about the trauma of dislocation and relocation in the New World, although in *The Holder of the World*, I use India as one third of the world. But they were very interested in *Desirable Daughters*, where the idea of the contemporary models of transformative identity processes in America, as experienced by two sisters in America, has struck a resonance in India. After all, almost every middle-class family has a relation in New Jersey.

A final question. What are you working on at the moment?

I am working on a sequel to my last novel, which I hope to complete by the end of the year. The title of this book is going to be *The Tree Bride*. Here Tara recounts in fuller detail the story of the transformation of her ancestor, Tara Lata, from five year-old child bride to sanctuary provider for the freedom fighters who fought the British.

[*The Tree Bride* was published by Harper Perennial in July 2005.]

Professor Mukherjee, thank you.